

EX-GERMAN  
SUBMARINE U-234  
IS TORPEDOED BY  
US SS GREENFISH  
ON NOVEMBER  
20, 1947, 40  
MILES NORTHEAST  
OF CAPE COD.

## U-BOATS: NAVAL FOLKLORE 700 FEET UNDER THE SEA

By Dave Trubey, Massachusetts Board of Underwater Archeological Resources

Whether fostered by fanciful images of adventure, fear, nationalism, or curiosity, the German U-boat, that elusive hunter from a far-off land, has become an established part of American naval folklore. Particularly along the New England coast, in many a seaport town, an old salt can be found with a tale to tell of the night he or someone he knows came face to face with a U-boat,

which were at times also used for storing freight. Additionally, XB U-boats were equipped with up to 15 torpedoes, but unlike a number of other U-boat classes, these subs had only two torpedo tubes, both located on the stern. The XBs measured 295 feet in length, 30 feet in breadth, and 15 feet in draft, making them the largest German U-boats ever built. The XBs could travel at a top

sailing to Japan under the command of Kptlt. Johann-Heinrich Fehler. Despite the vessel's size and firepower, it was unsuccessful in the destruction of Allied shipping.

Upon reception of cease-fire instructions from headquarters on May 4, 1945, U-234 was en route to Japan carrying technical drawings, two crated Me-262 fighter jets, 550 kilograms of uranium, and several senior-ranking German officers. Due to the cease-fire, Commander Fehler aborted his mission and set a course for the United States to surrender the vessel, but not before two Japanese officers, passengers on U-234, took their own lives. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison contends that much to the skipper's repulsion, the officers "dosed themselves with liminal instead of performing the traditional seppuku, and died slowly and ignobly," while other sources attribute the deaths to an overdose of sleeping pills.

Following the broadcasting of its position, U-234 was boarded by a U.S. Navy crew to prevent the anticipated destruction of the craft by the Germans and brought under escort to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Two years following its surrender, U-234 was motored northeast of Cape Cod where it was sunk on November 20, 1947 as a torpedo test target by the submarine *U.S.S. Greenfish*.

Today, the remains of U-234 lie in more than 600 feet of water some 40 miles off shore. While the condition of this site and that of the other four U-boats is unknown, rapid advances in deep water technology suggest that a new generation will catch a glimpse of these elusive vessels from a far off land.

More information on U-234 and other U-boats is available online at [www.uboat.net](http://www.uboat.net).

They saw them on the horizon: the two hard shapes topping the sea level stood out like squat battlements: they could only be U-boats—the hated and longed-for targets that were now part of the rubbish of defeat. — Nicholas Monsarrat, *The Cruel Sea* 1951

mere miles from our shores. Although it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction, one thing is certain: Americans are fascinated by U-boats, particularly those that lie at the bottom of the sea.

While tedious research and advances in technology may some day uncover more, five U-boats representing three classes are known to have gone to the bottom in the deep waters off the coast of Massachusetts. Although none were caught lurking outside our harbors and all suffered less than Hollywood fates being either scuttled or used as training targets by the U.S. Navy, their presence none the less serves as a stark reminder of a dark period in our world's history.

Of the five U-boats off the Massachusetts coast, the XB class U-234 is perhaps the best known. The XB class U-boats—a total of eight existed—were designed during World War II and constructed at the Germaniawerft yard in Kiel, Germany. As mine-laying submarines, XBs were capable of carrying 66 mines in 30 mine shafts,

speed of 17 knots on the surface, seven knots submerged, and had a maximum oil capacity of 368 tons. Designed for a crew of 48-60 submariners, the XBs were able to reach depths of more than 700 feet. As with most vessels, size comes with some significant drawbacks. What the XB class U-boats gained in size, they lost in diving speed; a compromise that ultimately resulted in the loss of six of the eight XB class U-boats constructed.

U-234, construction of which commenced on October 1, 1941 at Germaniawerft, sustained damage from bombing raids before even coming off the stocks. Originally intended for mine laying operations, it was rebuilt as a transport submarine to ferry war materials from Germany to Japan in order to fill the void left by the July 1944 loss of its predecessor, U-233. From March 1944 to February 1945, U-234 was a part of the Fifth Flotilla based at Kiel and for the last two months of its career served the Thirty-Third Flotilla at Flensburg, Germany. U-234 took part in only one active patrol from Kiel to Kristiansand, Norway, with the intention of

